

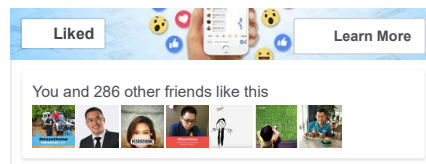
Cancer survivor shares how she was saved by stem cell transplant

BY CINDY LAI, REPORTERS@THEBORNEOPOST.COM ON JULY 6, 2017, THURSDAY AT 1:05 AM

LITE STORIES, SARAWAK



Foo and her mother pictured at the hospital during her chemotherapy.



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MIRI: The second child cancer survivor I met, Winnie Foo Hui Yii, is an encouraging story and a living proof to the community how blood stem cell transplantation could help cancer patients.

Foo, born and raised in Kuching, was 17 years old when she was diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukaemia (AML).



The news was definitely not something Foo and her family would have expected as she was then studying A-Level.

"I looked very pale, felt drowsy, nauseous and always felt tired. It persevered for three weeks before my parents suggested a check-up with our family doctor," she said, sharing her experience with The Borneo Post during a visit to Miri recently.

A blood test, she said, showed she had AML and before she could prepare herself for anything that followed, she was already warded in Sarawak General Hospital's haematology ward and in queue for chemotherapy in two weeks' time.

Thereafter, she was transferred to Hospital Ampang, one of the 11 haemopoietic transplant centres performing haemopoietic stem cell transplants in Malaysia.

"The doctor told me that though my condition was at the edge of turning cancerous, there was still hope for treatment and best, a transplant. I was in a state of shock. So were my parents. They too weren't prepared for anything like this.

“Honestly, at first my mind kept recalling a book ‘My Sister’s Keeper’ that I’d just finished reading right before I was diagnosed. The novel tells the story of a main character, Anna, and her sister who was suffering from leukaemia.

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“After my diagnosis, I really felt the dying sister’s feeling and facing death isn’t easy, especially for parents.”

While she was on cycles of chemotherapy, her family members were tested for possibility as matching bone marrow donor.

Unfortunately, there was no match and her parents decided to seek another option.

“My doctor suggested stem cell transplant, a transplant of blood-forming stem cells to restore the bone marrow. We were given option whether to search in China or Taiwan. We saw hope, however, not without expecting huge expenses,” Foo said.

At the time, Taiwan seemed to be the best hope for Foo to find a matching donor, who her doctor had targeted at least 60 per cent of compatibility. A total of seven matching donors were found over the span of three months since search begun, which was splendid news for them.

"Being a middle-income family, the expenses for the transplant that cost tens of thousands of ringgit were too much for my parents to bear."

It was said that if the donor happened to be amongst the patient's family members, part of the cost would be covered by the government. In Foo's case, she had no other choice but to seek a donor internationally.

That was when Sarawak Children's Cancer Society stepped in to assist Foo and her family, financially and on moral support.

Before the transplant, Foo underwent rounds of chemotherapy that used higher doses of medication and radiation therapy to kill the cancer cells. The final round of chemo right before the transplant was intended to get rid of the body's immune system, getting the body ready.



Foo pictured having her meal. Her mother made sure she was well taken care of with strict balanced meal.

The chemotherapy resulted in Foo's hair dropping severely to baldness. Initially, she felt the physical changes were interesting, however, not long after, she missed her hair terribly, but tried to put up a brave face.

After the transplant, Foo experienced post-transplant rejection, which according to her doctor is a condition known as immuno-suppression. She was put under doctor's observation and prescribed medication such as steroid to stabilise her condition.

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"My doctor told me that after transplant, my body's immune system was not quite ready yet. Eventually, it turned out okay for me," she said.

Now, at the age of 21 and on the road to recovery, Foo has restarted her A-Level and is now in her second year.

"Looking back at these three years, it taught me a lot about life and to be appreciative. My first day back to school wasn't easy for me because I was the oldest amongst my course-mates. Handling stares is the hardest part but I managed to overcome it.

"My parents went through a lot during that period. Apart from enduring the emotional roller-coaster, they made sure that I was well taken care of and not emotionally affected by my own condition. For that, I am so thankful to them.

"I guess I managed my emotion well in front of them too, though I would sometimes feel so helpless and weak and at times feeling angry on why things like this happen to me.

"But many a times, I told myself that I can do it, because I am still young and have the energy and time to battle against the sickness in me," Foo said.

When she isn't busy with her studies, Foo would spare her time to volunteer with SCCS.

"These children with cancer, though some of them may have been in the ward for a long time, they look cheerful.

"Being a volunteer, spending time with them, has taught me to be more empathetic, to be content with simple things and that there are many things in life that are more precious. Life is too short to burden yourself with negative thoughts."

This year, Foo has planned to have her head shaved in the coming Kuching leg of 'Go Bald' campaign that will be held on July 9 at CityOne Megamall.



Foo (second right) with her family.

Stem Cell Donor Awareness campaign

President of SCCS, Jocelyn Hee, said the awareness on stem cell donation in the country, particularly Sarawak, is still at a very low level.



Jocelyn Hee

“This is a new effort taken by SCCS to give hope and save lives of these cancer-stricken children as well as their family,” Hee told The Borneo Post.

According to statistics by Malaysian Stem Cell Registry (MSCR), there are 28,500 registered volunteers and only 372 of them are of Sarawak ethnicity.

“It is important to know that the diversity of race and intermarriage among Malaysians is one of the contributing factors to the low probability of finding a matching donor for a patient.”

Hence, she said, an awareness campaign on stem cell is the initial step they've taken to call on more donors.

“Sarawakians are highly encouraged to pledge as blood stem cell donors, to increase the percentage in finding a compatible donor for patients from Sarawak.”

Stem Cell Donor Awareness Drive and Talk will be held at CityOne Megamall's main stage on July 8 from 1.45pm to 2.30pm.

The talk will be sharing information on how stem cell donor-ship helps cancer patients, how one can be eligible to be a donor and the process to become one.

“We hope that more people could come and support the good cause, and to spread the word to every member of the society,” Hee said.



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